

2006 fishingforecast

new and improved:
iowa lake, stream and facility improvements

Lake Projects Paying Dividends To Iowa Anglers

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It's spring and the novelty of attending the various sport and vacation shows has worn off. Baseball is down to making its final roster cuts and spring football is getting underway. The days are getting longer, and the sun is getting warmer. Oil the reels folks because it's time. The 2006 open water fishing season is finally here.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources fisheries experts from around the state expect fishing to be good again this year in part because past water quality improvement projects have led to better water quality in lakes and streams. There have been a number of new physical improvements at several lakes in recent years that are now paying dividends. Better yet, it was another year of impressive fish growth.

Nowhere has the fish growth been more welcome than at Spirit Lake, where the 13-inch-plus walleyes from the 2001 class have finally moved past 14 inches and "a load is ready in the spring," said Tom Gengerke, fisheries supervisor for northwest Iowa.

Taking a quick look around

the state, and there is probably no other region as poised for success as southwest Iowa, where numerous projects and lake renovations are beginning to show results. The DNR added spawning beds, in-lake habitat, improved lake watersheds and renovated fish populations aggressively during the last few years. At Icaria, Anita and Fogle lakes, anglers should have excellent fishing. This is year three for the fish renovations at Icaria and Anita. Both lakes should have excellent fishing, especially Anita, if it refills. Anita is still about 5 feet low.

"If Anita fills, fishing will be gangbusters. If it doesn't fill, fishing will still be good, and we will try to provide access to put a boat on the lake," said Andy Moore, fisheries supervisor for southwest Iowa. "Icaria has 13- to 15-inch walleyes already and bluegills in the 7-1/2-inch neighborhood."

Improvements to Fogle Lake included lowering the lake level to combat an over-abundance of small fish, and installing spawning beds to bring fish near shore and available to land-bound anglers.

Spawning beds were placed in a number of other lakes in southwest Iowa in 2005 and more will be added in 2006. But anglers will have to do some exploring. Moore said he doesn't plan to reveal the locations.

While seeing those lakes rebound is good news, there is an old standby not too far away poised for another banner year.

"We had great crappie fishing last year at Lake Rathbun and we will again this year," said Steve Waters, fisheries supervisor for southeast Iowa. "This lake is a destination for crappie and walleye anglers. Last year the walleyes went wild with possibly the best fishing ever in 2005."

Walleye fishing at Rathbun is a little different than other traditional walleye lakes: it is a summer fishery. As the heat of the summer approaches and walleye fishing is generally slowing, Rathbun is just beginning. There is also an excellent number of channel catfish and a booming population of white bass that has gone somewhat ignored.

As for the traditional walleye lakes – Clear, Spirit, Storm, Black

Hawk and West Okoboji – how will fishing be in 2006? Just fine.

At Clear Lake, the tremendous start in 2005 was slowed when the yellow bass spawn hatched, offering a huge feast and making old marble eyes more finicky. “The fish are averaging 16 to 19 inches, and should provide good action this year,” Gengerke said. Yellow bass should average 10 inches, but will be fewer in number from past years. There is also a substantial increase in the muskie population, with an estimated 25 percent of the fish surveyed in the spring of 2005 exceeding 40 inches.

Storm and Black Hawk lakes each have improving walleye numbers and sizes but will probably offer better fishing for other species. Storm Lake should have excellent fishing for channel catfish, between 2 and 5 pounds, and white bass throughout the entire open water season. Black Hawk Lake will have tremendous fishing for 8- to 10-inch crappies and bullheads, and good early spring action for yellow bass.

West Okoboji Lake and its tremendous water quality and topography offers a diverse fishery, but the most consistent species in this lake is the bluegill. Of course smallmouth bass, muskie, northern pike, largemouth bass, walleye and yellow perch will be available in the 136-foot deep lake, and offer a different challenge. But the most consistent fish has been, and should be again, the scrappy bluegill.

“You really never know what you’re going to catch at West Okoboji, because this lake really

has it all,” Gengerke said. “It’s nice to come in with some big crappies, a walleye or two, some perch and a basket of bluegills. There is a lot of northern pike in the lake and smallmouth and largemouth bass.”

Bluegills will also be the premier species at Lake Sugema.

“If you’re a bluegill buster, put this one on your chart. The lake has good habitat and is just a tremendous bluegill lake,” Waters said. Other “circle on the map” bluegill lakes are Hawthorn, Belva Deer, Geode, Wapello, Big Creek, Fogle and the backwaters of the Mississippi River.

“Lake Geode is the Duke basketball of bluegills. It is consistently one of the top producers in the state over the years,” Waters said. “And Lake Wapello is one of my favorite escape lakes. The renovation work in the 1990s has brought good fishing and good water quality. It has become a consistently great fishery for bluegills

— up to 10 inches.”

Quality bluegill fishing is also available at Lake Hawthorn, but it is just one of many attractions at this 172-acre lake in Mahaska County. The lake has incredible bass structure, and probably the best bass population, for all sizes up to

A number of improvement projects in recent years is paying off for Iowa anglers. Water quality initiatives, infrastructure improvements and habitat development have all created additional and enhanced fishing conditions.



8 pounds, Waters said. Plus it has an excellent population of channel catfish up to 22 inches. "Right now, it is the place to go," Waters said. "Hawthorn is a complete lake, in the middle of nowhere."

Big Creek is making a move to become a premier bluegill lake this year. "This is an excellent bluegill fishery and is something people should take advantage of, especially in early June," Moore said. "If you find the spawning beds, you can do okay."

Another standby, the mighty Mississippi, has the best fish diversity in the state. There is good bluegill fishing in the backwaters, and the river is a channel catfish factory and can offer many different fishing experiences.

"Largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill, walleye, sauger — the Mississippi River has it all," said Bryan Hayes, fisheries biologist at Manchester. The upper Mississippi River has a robust population of northern pike.

Walleye anglers in the Big River begin fishing the tailwaters in early spring, then move to the wing dams during the summer months. In Pools 9 through 15, there is a lot of young walleyes coming on and fishing will be improving. Extensive habitat work at Mud and Sunfish lakes at the lower end of Pool 11 near Dubuque, are providing important deep water and over winter habitat, and will offer excellent panfish and bass fishing.

The in-river habitat improvements at Mud and Sunfish lakes were not the only projects in



northeast Iowa. Some important cold water streams also saw extensive work.

Hayes said that work has contributed to a tremendous growth in the number of streams with self-sustaining, naturally reproducing trout populations. In 1990, there were six streams with self-sustaining populations of brown or brook trout. Today, there are 27. Watershed improvements, combined with a research project on the survival of fingerlings reared from wild trout, has made today the "good old days" when it comes to trout fishing.

In Allamakee County at Big Paint Creek, major habitat work during 2004 and 2005 has improved the stream dramatically, and more

is planned for 2006. "In the past, Big Paint Creek was considered a marginal stream, with trout stockings in the spring and fall, but not in the heat of the summer. Now we can stock it year round, on a weekly basis," Hayes said.

Big Paint winds through a mix of public and private land and into the Yellow River State Forest. Some of the private land is open to public fishing, but not all. Hayes said it is important to the future of fishing that anglers respect private property, take out everything they take in and treat the land with respect.

Another project that is showing major improvements is Lake Macbride.

"Macbride is one of the lakes



I'm most excited about," Waters said. Improvements to keep sediment out of the lake, protect the shoreline, and new in-lake fish attracting habitat have led to excellent water quality and clarity and to an improved fishery. Macbride has a lot of 8- to 10-inch crappies, and a great bass population, including the hard fighting Kentucky spotted bass. Waters said he is also starting to see catchable-size bluegills that had been absent in the past.

Also making a re-appearance is the smallmouth bass population in the catch-and-release-only area of the Middle Raccoon River, from the Lennon Mills Dam at Panora to the Redfield Dam. Moore said sections of the river were deepened to 10 to

A number of Iowa lakes will look — and produce — a lot better to Iowa anglers in 2006. A number of lakes undergone additions and improvements in recent years, including the addition of fishing piers, jetties and enhanced fish populations.

12 feet, and some holes were dug up to 300 feet long. There are a lot of public accesses in that stretch and fishing has been good.

Rivers can be a bit tricky to fish, but have the potential to offer unbelievable action. In northeast Iowa, smallmouth bass should be king this year in the Maquoketa River, especially in the catch-and-release area from the Delhi Dam downstream, in the Upper Iowa, the Cedar from Janesville north and the Wapsipinicon from Central City through Independence. Other rivers with improving smallmouth numbers are the Volga, Turkey and Mississippi River Pool 9 through 13. Many of these same streams also have tremendous walleye fishing.

"From a smallmouth standpoint, I think things are looking better out there, and the walleye population has been improving ever since 2000," said Hayes.

Things are looking better nearly everywhere when it comes to fishing. There have been a number of projects to improve fishing across the state over the last year or two, including new fishing jetties, fish cleaning stations, boat ramps, stream accesses and more.

The northwest district alone accounted for two gravel boat ramps, three dredging projects, three universally accessible fishing piers, two in-lake habitat projects and four

accesses. Also added were four docks, three ramps, five fish cleaning stations, one pier, three jetties, one silt pond and one aeration system in the past four years.

There are a number of projects slated for 2006, including lake renovation projects at Viking, Cold Springs, Pierce Creek and Thayer.

Viking Lake will be lowered in the fall and killed out to eliminate a yellow bass population that has taken over the lake. It will be restocked in the fall with advanced-growth fingerlings, including 2- to 3-inch bluegills, 5-inch largemouth bass and 7-inch channel catfish. More than 20 silt basins will be installed in the watershed to keep nutrients and sediment out of Viking Lake.

"We won't do anything to the lake level until after Labor Day," Moore said.

The renovation plans at Cold Springs, Pierce Creek and Thayer Lake are to combat carp and grass carp that has impaired water quality.

So, with all the new features, watershed improvements, fish stocking and other work, what will make 2006 a good year of fishing?

"The combination of standby lakes and the lakes coming off renovation work, and watershed improvements will make it a good year. The improved water quality means better fish growth and better fishing," Moore said.

Waters had a different take.

"This will be a good year if people get off the couch, saddle up the vehicle and head out for fishing," Waters said. "The opportunities are everywhere, just make yourself a part of it."